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ABSTRACT

Looking back over the five years of Sesame Street's existence, it is possible to discern changes in the program in the areas of production, the role of research, and its audience; it is also possible to see the vast impact that the educational television show has had on preschool children both in the United States and abroad. The show's educational goals have changed from teaching numbers, letters, geometric forms, relationships, classification, reasoning and problem solving to include affective goals which relate to helping a child to learn to cope with failure and obstacles and to participate in social groups. The production has moved from its original rather frenetic pace to one which is softer and gentler in tone and more relaxing in effect. Research has been and continues to be an integral part of the planning process at CTW, concentrating in recent years on the specific needs of bilingual and bicultural children. The audience that Sesame Street attracted in the U.S. lead to other versions of the show for Latin America, Germany, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. A number of studies has confirmed the show's ability to teach and to attract large audiences composed both children and adult. (JY)

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Sesame Street At Five

The Changing Look of a Perpetual Experiment

To the Reader:

"Sesame Street" made its debut five short years ago, on November 10, 1969.

I cannot help but look back over these past five years with some mixed feelings.

As for the series itself, it has changed a great deal. This year's programming is significantly different from the earlier ones in look, mood and content. It is also, in my opinion, a much better show in at least two respects:

Its goals are richer and broader, and the production is visually, and otherwise, more interesting and sophisticated.

The series has had the enthusiastic support of children and parents and the praise of a diverse range of persons, many with no connection with education or early childhood development. This has been gratifying to all of us.

What has been perhaps especially gratifying is the fact that the concept works: Sesame Street proved, and rather conclusively, that television can teach preschool children basic skills and concepts—if it is used on its own terms as a visual medium of communication and entertainment.

However, few of us at the Workshop consider Sesame Street a complete success because, quite frankly, the series simply has not had the impact on children's television that we had anticipated. We had hoped that the commercial networks would develop more "age specific" shows and find a way to broadcast more weekday programs for children. The networks have worked to improve their Saturday morning programming, but while other improvements have been talked about for a long time, I am disappointed that the general pre-Sesame Street pattern has persisted.

Perhaps we should have expected this. Still, when we think of the tremendous potential of television for expanding the child's world, we feel there's much to be done.

In the meantime, Sesame Street will continue to change, and hopefully get even better.

Joan Ganz Cooney

Joan Ganz Cooney
President
Children's Television Workshop
October, 1974

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INTRODUCTION

"Sesame Street" is such a familiar and accepted piece of the television landscape that few people today consider the program revolutionary or, indeed, even highly unusual.

After all, why shouldn't such a powerful and pervasive medium as television teach intellectual skills and other useful concepts to preschool children? And why shouldn't the teaching be done with the sophisticated and entertaining techniques of commercial television, especially the commercials?

But back in 1966, when Sesame Street was only a germinating idea, these were, in the context of the television of that day, revolutionary concepts.

Until Sesame Street flashed on the nation's screens in late 1969, the underlying purpose of any television for a mass audience of children was to sell products. Sesame Street, on the other hand, was about to court that same audience with lively entertainment that, in effect, would try to 'sell' an educational curriculum. The rest, of course, is television history.

* * *

That Sesame Street no longer is considered a breakthrough in children's television is one measure of its achievement. Other children's shows -- including Sesame Street's first companion production, "The Electric Company" -- have used Sesame Street either as a model or a standard, or both.

That Sesame Street proved television to be a superb teacher of children when used imaginatively is another measure of its achievement. The fusion of education with entertainment was not incompatible after all.

Other measures of the show's achievement might include the devoted following of children from virtually all social backgrounds, the enthusiasm and acclaim of parents, the praise of educators and, perhaps even more remarkable, the generally strong (and often unsolicited) approval of adults in a diverse range of activities. Then there are the awards -- more than 100, including eight Emmys, a Peabody, a Prix Jeunesse and the Japan Prize.

* * *

However, perhaps because of this success, an important aspect of Sesame Street often tends to be overlooked: the essentially experimental, and hence evolutionary, nature of the show.

The fact is Sesame Street never is quite the same from season to season. At first glance the "street" may look the same, and Bert and Ernie, Big Bird, Susan and Maria and the other favorites do turn up from year to year.

But the show's goals and content have been changing all along in response to the needs and reactions of the audience.

The more traditional educational goals that formed the original basis of the show have been changing and expanding in all areas, cognitive, social and affective. For the upcoming sixth season, for example, the series will stress the creative aspects of divergent thinking -- the idea that often there are many ways of dealing with a problem or situation.

Some of the major currents in the country also find their way into the program's content. Ecology, for example, filtered into the curriculum a few seasons ago. And, in response to the concerns of the Spanish-speaking community, bilingual elements began appearing as integral parts of the show. This season career goals will be explored and the portrayal of women will continue to receive special emphasis.

In production values, too, the show has hardly been static. Over the years the street picked up snow, night scenes, seasons, and new live characters and Muppets.

* * *

Given the basically experimental and evolutionary nature of the show, Sesame Street undoubtedly will continue to change in significant ways in coming seasons.

One purpose of this backgrounder, then, is to touch upon the notable changes since Sesame Street went on the air in November, 1969.

Another is to review the entire Sesame Street experience, mainly through the people who created the series and worked on the show during the past five years.

The aim of this report is to offer a fresh perspective on a show that started, and still represents, a continuous revolution in children's television.

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A PERPETUAL EXPERIMENT

"Sesame Street" was created by the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) as an experiment in children's television -- a laboratory designed to stimulate the educational development of preschool children. Now, five years and more than 600 hours of videotape later, the program is still an experiment. As with any long-term experiment, the series has undergone change. This is especially true of the show's curriculum goals.

Ever since Sesame Street's first season in 1969-1970, the program's curriculum goals have continued to expand each year. There has been a steady move from a primary emphasis on teaching basic cognitive skills to those that deal with the child's behavior -- teaching viewers something of what emotions are and how they function, how their feelings influence their behavior, and how they as individuals work within society. At the same time the curriculum went on to explore, for example, such themes as ecology, the Spanish language and Hispanic culture and, this season, career awareness.

As CTW's president, Joan Ganz Cooney, notes, "Sesame Street is the only series in the history of television where the audience has played a role in shaping the content. Of all our critics, we pay most attention to the criticism of our target viewers, the children. As a result, we probably know more about how they react to any given character, sequence or show than anyone else. By the time observations are made from the outside, we're well on our way to implementing what the children have already told us. That's part of the experiment -- being our own worse critic."

EARLY OBJECTIVES: Initial curriculum goals were set during seminars in the summer of 1968 that brought together more than 100 leading specialists in early education and child development as well as researchers, writers, artists, musicians and television producers. Under the chairmanship of Dr. Gerald R. Lesser of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the group agreed to a set of specific instructional objectives. These focused on the traditional skills the group believed would be most helpful to a child, particularly a disadvantaged child, when he entered school. The underlying premise of the show -- its reason for being -- rested on research strongly suggesting that the first five or six years of a child's life were critical. It was during this period that his development was most rapid, and most subject to positive change.

For the first season the show's curriculum included specific instructions in numbers, letters, geometric forms, relationships, classification, reasoning and problem solving. The program also explored the child's world.

For the second season of 130 hour-long shows the goals were expanded to include number sets, simple addition and subtraction, and the extension of counting from 1 to 10 in the first season to 10 to 20. The simple recognition of letters was expanded to include the pronunciation of letter sounds. Word families made their appearance, along with a 20-word sight-building vocabulary of words common to a child's environment. Simple Spanish-language skills also were added to the curriculum. In sum, specific goals went from 40 in the first season to

63 in the second year.

During both seasons CTW's research staff worked closely with producers, providing them with a feedback on the appeal and impact of various show segments. This working partnership -- at the time unique in television production -- has become a standard procedure.

THIRD AND FOURTH SEASON GOALS: For the third season (1971-1972) there were fresh approaches to on-going subjects such as reading readiness, numbers and problem solving. As a result of research, the word family approach gave way to rhyming and verbal blending methods. There was more emphasis on the value of cooperation.

But perhaps the most noticeable changes were the additions of ecology, Spanish bilingual and bicultural goals, and Spanish-speaking members in the cast. As Dr. Edward L. Palmer, CTW's vice president for research, recalls, "Along with the rest of the country, we began to discover the Spanish-speaking population. As a result, we began building into the program special objectives for children from Spanish-speaking backgrounds -- some characters with whom they could identify so that they could feel the show was for them, too. We also developed a number of skits that reflected the Spanish language and culture so that they could identify with their heritage. I think these were important additions to the show. The Spanish-speaking people found their voice and they became visible in the country during the first years of Sesame Street."

For the fourth season, the show's sight-reading vocabulary was expanded. This, Dr. Palmer says, "provided a valuable sense of accomplishment, especially for the disadvantaged viewer." Also added that year were sorting and classifying by activity, and an experiment in representing handicapped children. The latter featured guest appearances by the Little Theater of the Deaf in the show's "street" segments. There was more emphasis on the bilingual and bicultural elements with another addition to Spanish-language curriculum goals.

FIFTH SEASON OBJECTIVES: For the fifth season (1973-1974) the main additions to the show's goals were primarily in affective behavior. "This was not a totally new area for us," says Dr. Palmer. "In our original seminars before the show went on the air, we discussed the feasibility of incorporating social, moral and affective goals within Sesame Street. But the decision was made to concentrate primarily on cognitive skills. What we did was to include at least some of the goals dealing with social and cultural behavior."

Starting with its second season, the series gradually began to place more emphasis on recognizing, accepting and dealing with such emotions as anger, surprise, fear, pride and happiness. These emotions were explored through the show's live characters as well as the Muppets and in animated films. Meanwhile, CTW's research staff identified other areas of affective behavior. Also during the season, there were more Spanish sight words and more complicated geometric forms.

GOALS FOR THE SIXTH SEASON: For the sixth season, which begins on November 4, Dr. Palmer says, "We're continuing our work on affect goals and we're adding goals in the area of creativity. The creativity

goals were designed to get away from the right answer orientation of the series which stemmed mainly from our need to script the shows and focus each segment -- that is, design segments in advance to fit a particular educational objective. In doing so we tended to produce a one-right-answer oriented show whereas an important learning experience for young children -- in addition to learning the right answers -- is to learn how to think flexibly and create multiple possibilities to explain an event or solve a problem.

"This season," he notes, "we're also working on goals that relate to helping a child learn how to cope with failure and obstacles and we're teaching him how to participate constructively in social groups."

'CONTINUING PRESENCE': The show's year-to-year continuity has become an increasingly important aspect in determining the curriculum goals. "Now that we're producing the show season after season," says Dr. Palmer, "it has become a continuing presence on the American scene. The child grows up through the program over the course of two, three, four and perhaps five years. Given we have the child for that long, and given we don't have to get across everything we have to teach in one year, we have been able to expand our curriculum very considerably. This is part of the reason the show is a continuing experiment. If we had kept the goals of the series the same -- knowing as we do now that we were going to have the child three, four and five years as compared with the initial assumption that we were going to have him only one year -- we would be missing a lot of good bets. There are a lot more things we can do."

The curriculum goals, he adds, will continue their evolutionary course. "We're always changing Sesame Street, and we probably always will."

AN EVOLVING PRODUCTION

Unlike many other children's television programs, Sesame Street does not turn on a single star or central character. If there is any one star, it is the format. Like the curriculum goals, it too has changed over the years -- if not in basic style and structure, which have proven remarkably durable and effective, then in production techniques, settings and cast number.

While the format evolved from a working relationship between producers and researchers, its starting point was an insight by Joan Ganz Cooney, CTW's president. Sometime before CTW was formed in May, 1968, she became convinced that the children of the television age possessed a high media literacy and that they were especially attuned to television commercials. In other words, they constituted, relatively speaking, a visually sophisticated audience.

As CTW's chairman, Dr. Lloyd Morrisett, recalls, "The whole premise was that, since you're going to be competing with commercial programming, you've got to give the viewers the quality they were accustomed to, particularly in the commercials."

David Connell, vice president for production, also recalls the early interest in commercials. "Joan had the idea that the television commercial would work. All of us from differing disciplines and backgrounds proved that the approach was sound. I remember a young filmmaker who came in to see us early in our planning session. He showed us some footage of his children in a supermarket, with their random comments, which demonstrated that small children remembered product names and ingredients even on products in which they had no vested interest. What this suggested was that whatever we came up with for Sesame Street should be patterned after those commercial messages."

However, as Morrisett remembers, "We knew that a quality program would cost a lot of money, but far less than the cost of any other viable alternative." As it turned out, CTW was able to attract an initial underwriting of $8 million to launch the Workshop and produce the first season of 130 hour-long shows. Half of the total funds came from the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the remainder from the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation.

The sizeable funding provided CTW with the resources to acquire a top notch staff and the lead time to develop a format and production that could give young viewers "the quality they were accustomed to."

The fast-paced magazine format that finally emerged became the Sesame Street style and standard. Typically it consists of from 40 to 50 separate segments, each with a specific curriculum goal. Through five seasons, this format has inspired the creation of thousands of live-action and animated films, Muppet sequences and the "street" segments which give the show its continuity.

INNOVATION AND IMPROVISATION: While the Sesame Street set remains basically the same -- a bit of an inner city street -- it has undergone some modifications since the first season.

"At first it was a straight row of houses and shops," says executive producer Jon Stone. "We changed that to one with a corner, primarily for more interest and better camera angles. And along the way, we have added a second story, more business settings and a play area for the street children."

Later seasons were added -- including snow -- along with night action on the street. The original shows were only in daylight.

As the show began to stress the outside world, more live action film went into the programs. "We now might have a sequence on how bread is made in a bakery or show, through time-lapse photography, how a bean is grown, harvested and delivered to the corner store," says Stone. "We now show children in the country more than we did the first year," says producer Dulcy Singer.

In recent seasons there also has been a significant shift in mood. "The show has softened quite a bit from the slam-bang shows in

the beginning," observes Dr. Palmer, the research vice president. "A great deal of material now is soft and gentle and gives the child an opportunity to relax. The show is in a much lower key."

The approach to the music, however, was set relatively early. However, not without some improvisation. "On our test shows, and on some of the early on-air programs, we did not use original music except for the theme," says Dave Connell. "What music we did use was of the 'let's dance' variety. We would buy records and try to fit them into the sequences. Later when we were told it would be faster to write the music than to go out and buy it and then try to make it fit, I thought the idea was the most absurd thing I had ever heard. But we tried it and it worked. We still do most of the music that way."

THE MUPPETS: Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch were created especially for Sesame Street. "Big Bird was not in the test shows," puppeteer Jim Henson remembers. "But when the decision was made to include puppets on the street, the subject got around to the story of the 500-pound canary, and that was the answer."

The Cookie Monster just evolved, and Sam the Robot was introduced for the 1973-1974 season. "We had a real problem with the robot," says Henson. "We had trouble trying to get a 'handle' on his personality."

Not so with the Snuffle-Upagus. The giant fantasy character was created for the third season with a more distinct purpose in mind. He was introduced to see just what he might be used for. Part of the rationale was to sprinkle the street scenes with surprises. By letting only Big Bird and the kids see the Snuffle-Upagus, the producers found they could achieve one of the show's curriculum goals: seeing things from another person's perspective, an important cognitive and social concept for children.

This season a new Muppet makes his debut: Poco Loco, a parrot-like character who is used to demonstrate "differing perspectives." Last year the Twiddle Bug family became part of the show.

In addition to making curriculum points, the Muppets have another purpose as well.

"Our aim with the Muppets -- whether it's Big Bird, Kermit, Grover, Ernie and Bert or any of the other assorted big and little creatures -- is to give children something to identify with on the show," says Henson. "They can see a bit of themselves in every one of the characters."

Dr. Palmer points out another aspect of the Muppets. "They helped turn the concept of monsters from its Gothic character and style of years ago into a set of characters who are soft, fluffy and lovable. They managed to do this without losing their appeal or audience, and without falling into another of the pitfalls the show itself tried to avoid early on -- of being so soft as to be condescending. We had to learn to be soft and gentle without being condescending."

The Muppets -- a name coined from "marionette" and "puppet" -- have become universal and popular creations here and around the world. Many of them are featured in the current "Ice Follies" which are touring 27 U.S. and Canadian cities this season.

CELEBRITIES: Almost from the start celebrities have volunteered to appear on the program. "There are no problems with booking 'name' personalities -- they all know the format and have an idea about the goals of the show," says Ms. Singer. "The celebrity segments appeal not only to preschoolers but also to their older siblings who often control television set tuning."

Among those who have appeared are Bill Cosby, Carol Burnett, James Earl Jones, Lena Horne, B.B. King, Burt Lancaster, Johnny Cash, Ruby Dee, the cast of Bonanza, Elle Mitchell, Joe Namath, the New York Knicks, the New York Mets, the Harlem Globetrotters, Pat Paulsen, Flip Wilson, Stevie Wonder, Lou Rawls and Pete Seeger.

RESIDENTS OF THE STREET: The number of permanent residents on Sesame Street has fluctuated over the years -- from a low of four during the first season, to a high of eleven during the third season, to seven during season five. For the upcoming sixth season the number will remain at seven.

"Over the years, experimentation has taken place with several other characters," says associate research director Tricia Hayes. "These were dropped because there were just too many for the children to identify with."

Will Lee, who plays the role of Mr. Hooper, the candy store keeper, says, "Far from being one-dimensional as we were at the start, the characters have become real people, with real problems, to the children."

Actress Loretta Long also notes a change in her attitude toward herself and her characterization of Susan. "I was too nice at the beginning, the great dispenser of milk and cookies. Just as the role of women in our society has changed over the past five years, so have the roles we created have changed. Now I am something besides a wife. I have an outside life as a nurse on the show. It's affected my relationship with the children -- I can 'rap' with them more -- and with my stage husband, Gordon, who has also evolved in personality and dimensions from the character of five years ago."

Bob McGrath, who plays the role of Bob, sees a major change in his relationships with the children. "We had the children just stand around on those early shows. Today we are more natural with the children and let them speak their own ideas on a problem."

McGrath credits part of the change to the younger children on the set and to the music which has sharpened his role on the street. "What I find particularly gratifying," he adds, "is that Sesame Street has accomplished more than teaching letters and numbers to preschoolers. The show has affected the viewpoint of the parents, too. When we make personal appearances, parents will say 'thank you for showing my children a broader point of view of life that I couldn't show them myself."

A FLEXIBLE APPROACH: "Viewers have responded more favorably to slapstick than any other comedy form we have tested -- that's why we use it so heavily," says researcher Tricia Hayes. "What children haven't found very funny are satires on adult soap operas and we once had a Muppet character named Dr. Hastings who was always falling asleep. All we did was put the children to sleep."

Says production vice president Connell: "We've tried to be flexible in our approach to the show. Within the confines of the curriculum we've made every attempt to give the children what they wanted and to give the production people what they wanted. We've also made an effort to adapt our programming to the suggestions of the many thoughtful people who have commented on the show or have written to us."

THE ROLE OF RESEARCH

Research plays a fundamental role in the season-by-season of Sesame Street. To a large degree this is because of its unique place in CTW's operations.

Prior to Sesame Street, educational television had either an educator or a producer in charge. CTW changed that. It gave the educator and producer equal status in the synergistic decision-making process. Hence CTW is both a television production unit and an educational laboratory. One cannot exist without the other.

"In a program like Sesame Street, it was necessary to plan the curriculum and to state the educational objectives in such explicit terms that producers and researchers -- including those who would be carrying out pre and post-season achievement testing -- could proceed without ambiguity of purpose and in a coordinated fashion," explains Dr. Edward Palmer, the research vice president.

"In the beginning we put most of our attention on the goals we understood best," he says. "These were goals that dealt with numbers, letters, geometric forms, body parts, and alike as opposed to the more wispy kinds of things like attitudes, social objectives and emotions and how to cope with them. Later we were emboldened by our success in the more cognitively oriented areas and began to deal more explicitly with the social and affective domains."

FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE RESEARCH: "We use 'formative' and 'summative' research," Dr. Palmer explains. "Formative research is part of the trial and revision process. It consists of taking partially completed materials out into the field, testing them, and feeding the information from that testing back into the continuing production process. Summative research is undertaken to assess the extent to which the program has achieved its educational objectives once it is on the air. It consists of going out into the field and testing groups of viewing and non-viewing children to see what learning advantage there is as a result of viewing the show. It is usually done by an independent testing organization.

"At the beginning of the Sesame Street project we were not at all clear on just what functions formative research could serve. After all,

there were no precedents of sufficient scope or generality to give us any clear guidance."

So Dr. Palmer and his staff began to develop their own research techniques. One of these was the "distractor," a rear-screen projection device which flashes various slides on the screen every 7½ seconds to determine if the child's attention can be diverted from the television set. Researchers note the child's eye movements and from this can determine a segment's ability to hold his interest from moment to moment.

"We really began to believe in that research when the distractor was used on the test shows," says David Connell, CTW's production vice president. "Our instincts had told us that so long as we were showing the Muppets or film, the child's attention could be held. But the street segments worried us. It was just a street. Nothing exciting happened there. The researchers showed us our instincts were right. Youngsters responded to the fast-paced segments and lost interest when the street scenes came on. As a result, we decided to use puppets on the street so it could be a fantasy kind of place. This testing of actual shows led to the creation of Big Bird and Oscar."

RESEARCH AND PRODUCTION - MAKING THE CONCEPT WORK: Researcher Tricia Hayes and her then fellow researcher Sharon Lerner remembered events that helped to create a practical working partnership between researchers and production people, particularly the writers. "We had a writer's notebook which attempted to explain in lay language the behavioral goals we were trying to achieve, but sometimes it was better to illustrate the point by first-hand observation," Miss Hayes says. "So, we did a lot of systematic child-watching."

Miss Hayes remembers one incident in particular. "We were hung up on how to demonstrate cooperation to a three-year old, so in one of our field studies we went to a park. There were two small children sitting in adjacent swings both yelling 'Push me!' After awhile, it occurred to one of them that if he pushed the other non-swinger, he might be pushed in return. We included this in the writer's notebook and it was incorporated into the show."

TESTING PILOT SHOWS: Of the research undertaken before the first season debut perhaps the most significant was the testing of five hour-long pilot programs.

"It forced us to make decisions much earlier than we might have otherwise," recalls Connell. "It forced us to cast the show and this gave the performers a chance to work together as a group. It gave the writers a chance to piece together a complete show from what, up until that point, had been individual segments. And it gave us actual experience in checking out what formative research had indicated as promising."

As Dr. Palmer remembers, for those of us in research the pilot shows meant we could evaluate completed programs with children in their actual viewing situations -- their homes. It would also provide us with a check against what suggestions we already had made to production, and we could do a pilot test on the summative research procedures that were being developed by an outside research organization."

The testing was done in day care centers in New York and under

actual broadcast conditions in Philadelphia. Summative research, by an outside organization, was completed after the close of the first season, in the spring of 1970.

OTHER RESEARCH: Researcher Hayes remembers the early field studies. "We took other children's shows out to see how well they held a child's attention. One in particular, even though the content was educationally lacking, kept the children's eyes glued to the set. What was creating this unusual attention was a technique called 'pixilation' which produces a choppy, Chaplin-like movement of the characters. We mentioned this to the producers and it's been used on Sesame Street ever since."

Formative research, of course, continues and the current emphasis is on affective behavior. For example, a study of the social goal of "cooperation," conducted by CTW's research and production staffs with a research group in Oregon, suggests a sample of children learned cooperative behavior from experimental segments inserted into Sesame Street programs.

The research staff is now conducting a comprehensive field study to pinpoint and evaluate the attributes that make a particular show, segment or portion of a segment more or less appealing and comprehensible to children. "We're trying to identify the attributes that typically are present in a winner," explains Dr. Palmer. Dozens of attributes are under study, he says, such as pace, redundancy, fantasy vs. realism, and so on.

This year CTW completed an extensive bilingual and bicultural study to define a curriculum that would be relevant to the Spanish-speaking child and also determine the linguistic and cultural symbols that would help the child recognize and appreciate his Hispanic heritage. "As a result of our work of the past few years," says Dr. Palmer, "we now have a television show that makes a four-year-old child of Spanish background feel that the show sees him out there and that it is talking to him. We think this is an accomplishment."

ATTRACTING THE AUDIENCE

Long before Sesame Street's debut in 1969, CTW concluded that off-beat approaches would be needed to build a large audience of preschool children, particularly in economically deprived neighborhoods.

CTW's advisors agreed that these efforts should involve parents and extend beyond the television set. As Dr. Chester M. Pierce, psychiatry professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and member of CTW's advisory board, recalls: "We had a double problem that first year. The first was that before Sesame Street the audience for public television was very small. The second was the matter of difficult-to-dial UHF stations in some of our target-viewer urban markets."

To meet these challenges, CTW's staff during the first season worked closely with public television stations in selected cities across the country. By the second season premiere in the fall of 1970, CTW had organized a field services department with full-time field representatives in several urban centers. This grass roots activity, something new in television, now covers 31 states.

Coordinators, originally drawn from Vista and the Peace Corps, work closely with educators, community-action agencies, neighborhood groups and individuals to establish viewing centers for working mothers or parents without television. They also encourage follow-up activities by parents to reinforce the lessons of the show, and distribute supplementary educational materials related to the program's curriculum, such as the "Sesame Street Magazine."

"Many of the youngsters we especially want to reach are in low-income families," says Evelyn P. Davis, CTW's vice president for Community Education Services. "Without special viewing centers, it would be impossible to get to precisely the children we want most to teach."

SPREADING THE WORD: To develop nation-wide interest in the show among young children and their parents, CTW launched a massive information effort. As CTW's president Joan Ganz Cooney notes, "Changing the viewing habits of preschool children from purely entertainment fare to an educational show was a major obstacle we had to face and overcome. We had to take every opportunity to spread the word about the show. Our publicity effort was of a scope that few, if any, television shows had ever undertaken for preschoolers."

That effort took many forms. The news media provided broad pre-show coverage. A nationally-televised news conference announced the series six months before its premiere. The series itself received a prime-time preview on a commercial network two days before its public television debut. National Educational Television helped. So did local stations. Even commercial outlets that would not be carrying the show cooperated with advance announcements and special promotional features. "You can scarcely name any of the traditional avenues of promotion that did not come through," says Mrs. Cooney.

CTW also created some of its own promotion through a unique utilization effort among its hoped-for viewers. "Everyone pitched in," remembers Tricia Hayes. "We even had sound trucks driving through inner-city neighborhoods to help attract our primary target audience."

Executive producer Jon Stone says, "We thought we had a good show that met the educational goals. But if we failed to attract an audience, there would have been no place for us to hide." As it turned out, there was no need to hide.

AUDIENCE AND COST: By the end of the first season Sesame Street's audience, based on CTW studies, was estimated at nearly five million children. Since then the audience has almost reached saturation among preschoolers in all areas where the series is broadcast.

From a cost standpoint, Sesame Street turned out to be an educational bargain. In its most recent season the program's cost -- including production, research and evaluation -- was estimated by CTW at 53 cents per viewer for the 130-program series, or much less than a penny per viewer per one-hour program.

This prompted the then U.S. Commissioner of Education, Sidney P. Marland, to remark that Sesame Street was one of the best investments the Office of Education has ever made. The show's comparatively low cost per viewer stems primarily from production efficiencies. As production vice president Connell says, "Look at what it costs us per hour versus the average Saturday morning fare. Our average cost is about $35,000

per hour of show produced. Saturday morning commercial half hours for children cost in the range of $65,000."

NON-TARGET AUDIENCE VIEWING: A significant finding of an A.C. Nielsen Company study is the increasing number of households with no preschool child that nevertheless tune in to Sesame Street. More than 20 per cent of these households viewed the program an average of 2.3 times on a six-week cumulative basis during the 1973 rating period. "This suggests to us that Sesame Street has a special appeal beyond the primary target age group," says Dr. Palmer, the research vice president. "It appears that older children and adults view the show."

OTHER MEDIA: The early success of Sesame Street Magazine led to the development of other materials that involve physical manipulation and participation -- games, toys, books and records. CTW eventually created a special division to license manufacturers to insure that their products enhance the educational aims of the series.

Along those lines CTW recently co-introduced with the Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., a major producer of educational materials, a set of three multi-media classroom kits that use curricula from both Sesame Street and The Electric Company to teach beginning reading skills.

In addition to the instructional value of all CTW play items, their production and sale provide funds to help support CTW's experiments in instructional television.

THE SERIES GOES GLOBAL

What started as a uniquely American television series has spread rapidly around the world. As Sesame Street begins its sixth season in the U.S., the series, in various versions and languages, is being broadcast in more than 50 other countries and territories.

A new, culturally adapted version in French went on the air in France in September 1974, and three foreign-produced counterparts to the U.S. production also are broadcast. "Plaza Sesamo," produced in Spanish and currently being shown in 14 Latin American countries and territories, is about to begin production of a second season in Mexico City. "Vila Sesamo," a Portuguese-language series, began its second season last March in Brazil while "Sesamstrasse" continues to be seen in Germany.

Meanwhile the English-language version is being shown in 41 countries and territories, including such places as Pago Pago, Crete, Indonesia and Wales. In addition, there have been experimental runs of Sesame Street in several other countries to test the series' appeal and effect. Even Poland, Yugoslavia and Romania have run a limited number of programs.

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE VERSION: Interest abroad came quickly after the series went on the air in this country in late 1969. Canada, Australia and New Zealand were the first to inquire and within a few months there were requests from most of the English-speaking world and from several countries where English is spoken or taught as a second or third language.

Since CTW's funding was for the full-time production of the U.S. series, the Workshop had not considered the possible uses of the program outside the country. For example, CTW had not provided for the dubbing of a foreign language, or even changing the English dialogue to reflect the idiom of another land. Videotapes of the show were made with a single track so there was no way to separate voice, music and sound effects. Hence the exportable product initially was the original English-speaking version that was produced to reflect the culture of this country.

However, CTW clearly stated at the outset that it would not tell any country that Sesame Street would be beneficial to its preschoolers. While CTW had learned a great deal about the educational value of the series in the U.S., it did not have the same knowledge of another culture and could not assume the same educational options would be appropriate for any other country.

Thus CTW made the series available to educators and broadcasters outside the U.S. who believed the original version of the show would be appropriate for their audiences. In Japan and Germany, for example, the series has been used to teach English to older children.

LOCALIZED VERSIONS: Plaza Sesamo is produced in Mexico City for a potentially larger audience than the United States' preschool population. There are an estimated 22 million preschoolers in Spanish-speaking Latin America.

Latin American producers, writers, and actors created Plaza Sesamo after consulting academic advisors and early childhood experts throughout the Southern hemisphere. While some of the cartoon and puppet sequences are from the U.S. version, the series is basically designed for Latin understanding. Even the puppet figures have taken on Latin American overtones. Instead of Oscar the Grouch there is Paco, an opinionated parrot. And the Big Bird role has been transformed to a crocodile-like creature named Abelardo.

Plaza Sesamo starts a second series in Mexico this season with an entirely new format of 260 half-hour shows rather than the first season's 130 one-hour programs. The new series, a joint effort of CTW and Televisa, Mexico's largest television network, is expected to be telecast eventually in other Spanish-speaking Latin American countries as well.

Vila Sesamo, the Portuguese-language version produced jointly by TV Globo in Rio de Janeiro and TV Cultura in Sao Paulo, went on the air in Brazil in October, 1972, as a daily 55-minute series intended for the the country's 11.5 million preschool children. The show, viewed in 18 Brazilian states, featured Garibaldo, an immensely popular equivalent of Big Bird. As with the Spanish version, educators and early childhood experts in that country advised the show's producers in the development of the curriculum. A second series, in a new format of 260 half-hour shows, went on the air last spring and continues to March, 1976.

The German language "Sesamstrasse," unlike the U.S. and initial Latin American versions, is a half-hour show. This prompted a 13-

year-old viewer to remark in a letter to CTW, "I think it is very mean that the telecast is shorten (sic) from one hour to a half hour." This version, which went on the air in January, 1973, bears the closest resemblance to the American version. It has puppet and cartoon sequences dubbed into German and "street scenes" with Oscar and Big Bird. The show, produced in Hamburg and aimed at three million children, is being shown twice a day in Northern and Western Germany. Negotiations have been completed for a second series that will be a follow-on to the current show which concludes its run in September, 1975.

CULTURALLY ADAPTED VERSION: "Bonjour Sesame," a new culturally adapted version composed entirely of programs from the first four seasons of the original U.S. show, started in France this past September over ORTF, the French national television network. The series of 65 half-hour programs is dubbed in French and designed to appeal to that country's estimated three million children from the ages of three through seven. Bonjour Sesame includes such favorites as the Cookie Monster and Count von Count, but omits the American version's street scenes (no Gordon, Susan, or Big Bird, for example) as well as sequences that depend upon the English language or American cultural nuances.

"It looks so French you can't believe it's a U.S. product," says Jack H. Vaughn, CTW's director of international development who is a former diplomat and a former director of the Peace Corps. "Ernie and Bert especially are so French -- the gestures and posturing look perfect."

Similar culturally adapted versions, Vaughn says, are in the works for the Netherlands and Scandanavia. "They're easy to dub," he adds, "because for the most part they're made up of puppet sketches and animated cartoons. Only about 10 per cent are live action sequences." Vaughn expects other dubbed editions to appeal to many countries elsewhere in the world.

THE IMPACT OF THE SHOW

> "Sesame Street is the most responsible program that has been developed for children as a way of introducing them to some of the basic tools necessary for the attainment of literacy. Just as children can readily distinguish a toy -- that is, something that is specially designed for them -- they also realize immediately that this is a program for them."
>
> Margaret Mead, in Redbook, October, 1973

Sesame Street proved at least two things: it could teach youngsters basic facts and skills and at the same time attract a large and devoted audience. The show did something else, too. It

won the acclaim of persons in many fields and in many countries.

As for Sesame Street's effectiveness, an evaluation after the first season by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), a non-profit organization, resulted in these principal findings:

-- Children who watched the program showed greater learning gains than children who did not, regardless of whether they were from inner-city, suburban or rural homes or whether they were boys or girls or black or white.

-- Children who watched the most gained the most.

-- The skills best learned were those that had received the most time and attention on the program.

-- Three-year-old children made greater gains than older children.

-- Children from disadvantaged situations who watched frequently made gains that surpassed those of middle class children who watched infrequently.

The last point is particularly significant because one of Sesame Street's prime purposes was to reach disadvantaged preschoolers.

In another important finding, children who watched the show the most, and hence learned the most, tended to have mothers who watched the program with them. Moreover, these mothers often discussed the program with their children, reinforcing the lessons.

This finding supports the view of anthropologist Margaret Mead who wrote, "It seems to me that a child will get the most out of Sesame Street when the adult who spends the most time with him or her watches the program often enough to know what is currently going on. Otherwise, as with all unshared programs, the child's viewing may separate child and parent or child and teacher instead of providing background for more communication." (Redbook, October, 1973)

Dr. Samuel Ball and Gerry Ann Bogatz, ETS researchers who directed the national summative evaluation of Sesame Street from the beginning, said after the first season results that, "To those of us who have been studying the show since its creation, a good deal of what has been noted seems rather remarkable. We remember the pre-Sesame Street days only two years ago when many educators were questioning if nationally televised educational television was capable of teaching even the most simple skills, such as reciting the alphabet."

"Sesame Street has proved that television can be a very successful educational medium, and its potential has only just begun to be realized. Right now, through Sesame Street, it's teaching our children some basic facts and important cognitive skills."

RESULTS CONFIRMED: Later studies by ETS confirmed the first-year results. Perhaps more gratifying were the new data turned up by the studies. For example, teachers of even one-year Sesame Street "graduates" reported that these children were better prepared for

school than younsters who watched the show infrequently or not at all. The report also noted that there was nothing to suggest that the change from a fast-paced television format "turned-off" children to conventional classroom instruction.

Other evidence suggested gains in favorable viewer attitudes toward people of other races. Likewise, Sesame Street seemed to have a positive impact in the areas of vocabulary, mental age and I.Q., as measured by performance on one of the standardized tests used with preschool children. These results, it should be noted, have never been among Sesame Street's objectives. The program also was found to be as effective with five-year-olds as with three-year-olds, a conclusion not drawn in the first year study.

INNER-CITY STUDIES: Other surveys point up the continuing impact of Sesame Street in inner-city homes. Daniel Yankelovich, Inc., conducted three studies between 1970 and 1973, including surveys in New York's East Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant areas, and in low income neighborhoods of Chicago and Washington, D.C. Mothers or other older persons surveyed reported the incidence of regular viewing by preschool children from household to household. Here are the results:

Area	Households Reporting Regular Viewing		
	1973	1971	1970
Bedford Stuyvesant	92%	77%	90%
East Harlem	94	86	78
Chicago	97	95	88
Washington, D.C.	67	59	32

Washington's audience, which has doubled since 1970, is particularly significant because the program is on a relatively hard-to-dial UHF frequency.

"On the basis of other similar studies, we might well by now have anticipated a leveling off or decline in Sesame Street viewing," Yankelovich's 1973 report observes. "Instead, the program has become virtually an institution with ghetto children."

PARENTAL FAVORITE: A nationwide survey of parent reaction to television programs ("Television and the Public"), sponsored by CBS and conducted in 1970 by the Bureau of Social Sciences Research, reports that parents ranked Sesame Street first among the programs their children watched and which they, the parents, considered best for them.

In an unexpected finding, the 1970 report reveals Sesame Street was the most frequently mentioned children's program as 30 per cent of the respondents identified it within weeks of its debut. The series eclipsed traditional children's favorites by several percentage points. The study concludes that "the best-regarded programs are those that are designed

to educate and not just to entertain. Sesame Street lead the list of favorite programs in 1970 despite the fact that half the samples of parents could not receive an educational television station."

CTW's advisory chairman, Dr. Gerald Lesser, believes Sesame Street's large audience is one of the show's greatest achievements. "We weren't kidding anybody," he says. "We said we were going to do something educational with this show. And we've done it. Sesame Street has demonstrated that educational television -- and I don't mean educational television in the classroom which has been a disaster from the word 'go' -- can be successful in competitive terms; that is, in attracting a large and loyal audience."

STRONG IMPACT OVERSEAS: Studies of Sesame Street's effectiveness have been conducted overseas and the findings for the most part, closely parallel those in the U.S.

Plaza Sesamo's value was demonstrated through tests in Mexico of comparable viewing and non-viewing groups of three-to-five year olds. Included were tests before the show was aired, again after seven weeks of telecasting, and finally post-tests six months after the show's debut. The tests -- which involved 173 youngsters and were conducted under the supervision of Dr. Rogelio Diaz Guerrero, director of the Center for Research and Behavioral Sciences in Mexico City -- showed that viewers outperformed non-viewers in nine different achievement tests that reflected the educational curriculum of the series. Viewers scored significantly better than non-viewers in such subjects as general knowledge, numbers, terms of relationship, classification, parts of wholes, letters and words, oral comprehension, visual perception and sorting.

Meanwhile, a team of educators of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem reported in a September, 1972, study that five year-old youngsters of low socio-economic background had registered gains after watching Sesame Street for a few months.

In Australia, K.I. Lemercier and G.R. Teasdale, reporting on a Sesame Street study in that country, concluded that the "superior performance" of the subjects in their study supported the conclusions of summative research in the U.S. Their report was published in the Australian Psychologist of March, 1973.

The introduction of Sesame Street in the Caribbean territory of Curacao has had the effect, according to Harry Lasker, who directed an independent survey of the public's response to the program there, "of demonstrating the positive use of television as a means of educating the children in a country where an equal amount of time is spent in the classroom and in front of a television set."

The survey in Curacao, conducted four months after Sesame Street was introduced in the Papiamento-speaking territory, revealed that an estimated 59 per cent of the children whose homes have working television sets watch the show almost every day, while about 80 per cent view the program from time to time.

And in the nearby Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago, Farouk

Nuhammed, program director of Trinidad and Tobago Television (TTT), reported that "Sesame Street is introducing new concepts to both the preschoolers and the older children to which they otherwise wouldn't have been exposed."

In Jamaica, younsters responded to their first exposure to television through Sesame Street. In an unusual research project, a team of international researchers, working with Jamaican educational broadcasting officials, undertook a special study to assess the impact of TV and its potential educational value among children who had never before been exposed to the medium. Using mobile video-cassette systems, a Harvard University team took Sesame Street to remote mountain villages to test the reaction of first-time viewers. The results were being analyzed by the Harvard Center for Research in Children's Television, a joint undertaking of Harvard's Graduate School of Education and CTW.

INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM: Educators from around the world, like their U.S. counterparts, found that Sesame Street was indeed unique. The International Commission on the Development of Education cited Sesame Street as "the most important audic-visual experiment aimed at preschool children so far." The commission, headed by Edgar Faure, former Prime Minister and Minister of Education of France, was established by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1971.

Shortly after its original airing in January, 1973, Plaza Sesamo became the most popular children's program on Mexican television, and it has also been well received in Central and South American nations and Puerto Rico.

El Heraldo de Mexico, a leading newspaper in the capital, said, "Plaza Sesamo, a program which begins a new period in Latin American television, is a complete success." A Mexico City TV critic enthused: "A stupendous program...one of the best presents that children have received from TV."

In Ecuador, El Telegrafo, the nation's largest daily newspaper, said of the Spanish-language series: "In this age of electronic pictures and miracles, a marvelous door opens to deliver the unequalled treasure of education and easy learning of the ABC's and numbers, in the original, beautiful, entertaining and exciting manner, to astonished eyes and ears of children -- Plaza Sesamo."

Chile's Ultimas Noticias, the second largest newspaper in the country, commented: "Plaza Sesamo would seem to fill an important gap, and as time will tell, will be an important contribution for the little people of our country."

Vila Sesamo, the Portuguese-language version, has also fared well. The initial series, which went on the air in October, 1972, received the Helene Silveira Award -- the Brazilian equivalent of the American Emmy -- as the best educational program, and the actress playing the female lead, Sonia Braga, was selected as the top actress of the year.

Brazil's former top educational officer, Jarbas G. Passarinho, the then minister of education and culture, said that "Vila Sesamo represents an excellent instrument of preschool education which is of great value and power in the field of communications. He praised the series particularly for the "variety of its offerings, for the charm of its characters, for the quality of its dialogue, and for the appropriateness of the topics with which it deals."

ACCOLADES IN EUROPE: Sesamstrasse, too, has received accolades from private and professional sectors. Germany's leading news weekly, Der Speigel, devoted a 14-page story to the program within a month after the show's debut in January, 1973, calling Sesamstrasse "the supershow of the season." The same news weekly quoted West German Science Minister Hans Leussink as calling the series "so far the most successful TV contribution to preschool education."

In research conducted last spring by the Hans Bredow Institute for Radio and Television, which is observing Sesamstrasse for the Federal Ministry of Education and Science, the program moved into first place among all shows seen by children from ages three through 10. The program attracted 89 per cent of the youngsters who watched television, a 17 per cent increase from a comparable period in 1973. And among parents, Sesamstrasse ranked first, with 79 per cent of those in the sample selecting the program as especially suitable for pre-school children. This was a 13 per cent increase from the previous year.

Perhaps the most gratifying international reaction occurred in Great Britain. After the British Broadcasting Corporation decided against airing the series, test showings and telecasts on London Weekend, that city's commercial outlet, brought such favorable public and press response that Sesame Street was shown regularly over stations covering over much of Great Britain, including London.

The showing in the British Isles also brought some of the most satisfying accolades that the program has received. In a London Times editorial page essay, Nigel Lawson, once the editor of the intellectual journal, The Spectator, wrote: "I have little doubt that Sesame Street is the most important programme ever to have been shown on television. It is, in its way, a minor miracle."

And TV producer Sasha Moorsom, in the September 1973 issue of Encounter, wrote, "Perhaps we should admit that, at the moment, this is something that the American Children's Television Workshop does better than anything we Europeans are doing, and go on to take advantage of the outstanding skill (and money) that has gone into the preparation of the remarkable Sesame Street."

TV'S MOST HONORED SHOW: Sesame Street has won more than 100 awards, including 20 major honors, since its debut in 1969. Included are eight Emmys -- presented by the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences for the series, its writing, its Muppets and its music -- and the George Foster Peabody Broadcasting Award. The program also won the European Prix Jeunesse International Award and the Japan Prize.

SESAME STREET'S LESSONS

Because of its experimental and evolutionary nature, Sesame Street has taught CTW and its advisors valuable lessons about television, education and young children.

TV CAN TEACH: As Dr. Chester Pierce, professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and member of CTW's advisory board, says, "There are very positive impacts of the program. The most overt is that the show has demonstrated that you can teach by television techniques at any age. In a covert manner, the series had led the way for a sequence of changes of attitudes whereby more dignity is directed to the needs of children. Sesame Street has fostered the role and the worth of individualism -- kids can say, 'they're doing this for me.' It has helped in the fight to make the child feel he has a first-class citizenship, he means something, he is an individual."

UNIVERSAL APPEAL: Next is the matter of the visual and audio appeal of television programming. "Unlike other studies of successful applications of television to education which, in the main, have taken the form of a televised classroom course with required viewing, the appeal of Sesame Street and the way it is presented is the sole incentive to viewing," says Dr. Gerald Lesser of Harvard's Laboratory of Human Development and chairman of CTW's advisory board.

"It has taught us that entertaining television can teach without hiding educational intentions and still attract a large and devoted audience of young children from all parts of the country. Kids accept TV on TV's terms. They accept school on school's terms. And even with the non-requirement to view," Dr. Lesser continues, "the program gave us our first real evidence, beyond scattered anecdotes from parents, of the remarkable rate at which children can learn in response to television.

"What this suggests is another of Sesame Street's lessons: we must begin to appreciate how well and how rapidly children can learn at very young ages, especially from visual media."

VALUE OF REPETITION: To CTW's vice president for research, Dr. Edward Palmer, the repetitiveness of Sesame Street's lesson segments is one way learning can be accomplished. "Each time a child views a segment, he sees something new, something he didn't see before," he says. "And what he learns may not be at all what another child, viewing the same material, takes away from the experience. What it does mean, though, is that from repetitive education by television, each child has an opportunity to gain increasing amounts of positive information, regardless of his point of view."

TV DOESN'T PUNISH: "Even more important," says Dr. Palmer, "is television's non-punitive nature. This greatly relieves the pressure to 'pass' -- a child can flunk school, neighborhood, family, friends and a host of other things, but he can't flunk television."

David Connell, CTW's production vice president, sees television as an opportunity to expand both the intellectual and the emotional content

of learning. "I am convinced that there is no separateness to the two -- if a child learns to count or to say the 'A-B'C's,' he has a feeling about it," he says. "And, if he learns something about emotions, he has a concept of them.

"To me, our experience with Sesame Street has proven that television can be a flexible and responsive medium. It can be tailored to the particular needs and desires of its audience. And despite some criticism that television produces passive 'zombies', the show had demonstrated that good television can result in active involvement."